



Thinking Positively in Stressful Times

Obstacle, challenge, problem, opportunity – the way you describe a situation will predict how you are likely to respond. Are current events and changes in your life seen as obstacles designed to defeat you or challenges that motivate you to take action? Are problems threatening, or do you see opportunity for personal growth hiding in even seemingly impossible situations?

Research has demonstrated that how we view a situation affects our emotional state, level of stress, success in completing a task and even our health. People who have a more positive perception of the outcome of events will experience less stress, be healthier and generally be more successful than those who expect the worst or continually minimize their own efforts. Fortunately, there is evidence that positive thinking can be learned. The first step, however, is to become aware of any negative patterns of thought that exist. Then, there are techniques you can practice to change unproductive and even harmful patterns of thought.

The main difference between positive and negative thinkers is that positive thinkers don't allow negative experiences to keep them from moving forward, while negative thinkers feel (and often act) helpless.

So, how can you change your way of thinking from a negative to a positive outlook? There are two general ways for dealing with negative beliefs – finding a way to put them out of your mind when they pop up, and proving to yourself that they're incorrect. The first strategy requires you to find a way to ignore or "turn off" negative thoughts. Some people do this by using mental images of positive things or events to counter the negative thoughts; others find it useful to concentrate on some object to help shift attention away from the negative thought.

These techniques can be good "first aid." However, a more lasting solution is to disprove negative thoughts by arguing against them. By effectively countering negative beliefs, you can get yourself ready to take action. The most convincing way to argue against a negative belief is to prove to yourself that it's factually incorrect. Many negative responses are overreactions, so often it isn't hard to come up with evidence to counter the belief.

It's important to remember that merely saying positive things to yourself will not work to change your thinking from negative to positive. Being more positive is not based on making yourself feel better through pretending, but about thinking clearly and accurately.

Don't let your thoughts lead you to the worst possible conclusion. You can take adequate steps for protection without assuming that every fire alarm means a new disaster has occurred. Such "catastrophic" thinking will only immobilize you. Again, remember that the negative thinker expects only the worst. The positive thinker, however, looks at the situation as a challenge and makes plans to take action. In this case, it's important to recognize that even if a disaster does occur, thinking positively (e.g., "I'm going to be all right") can contribute to a positive outcome.

As a final note, when you start to apply these techniques, recognize that changing the way you think may be gradual and that any new skill takes practice to master. Acknowledge your own ability to make this change – your perseverance, insight and dependence on your own inner resources.

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